

Austria, Kristine

Subject: President Medvedev on the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia
Attachments: President Medvedev interview.doc

Hello,

As you are aware, the three-year anniversary of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war is fast approaching. President Medvedev spoke on this subject to select Russian media in Sochi yesterday. Below and attached is the full English-language transcript of his comments for your review. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Best,
Anna

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[17:33:04]

Kotrikadze:

Mr. President, thank you very much for agreeing to answer our questions, including those from the Georgian PIK TV network. August 2008, the Russia-Georgia war - that was three years ago, but its consequences are still felt today, even though that war only lasted for five days. Right now, we are in Sochi, and Georgia is just a few kilometres away: Abkhazia is right across the border from here. But I cannot go to Abkhazia, I being Georgian, because I will be simply denied entry. And it will be Russian border guards who will stop me. Five hundred thousand **Georgian** refugees have found themselves in a similar situation, being unable to return to their homes. How could you help those people?

[17:33:50]

Medvedev:

I think it is possible to help them, but that would require action aimed at finally restoring peace, so that Abkhazians, Georgians and Ossetians could engage in civilized dialogue. That would enable them to deal even with the most complex challenges, including the issue of refugees, or the issue of entry and transit. All of these matters are secondary to the conflict that took place almost exactly three years ago. Therefore, diplomatic efforts, negotiation, and the willingness to listen to one another - these are the necessary prerequisites for resolving these issues. And on top of that, one also needs to recognize the reality that has emerged in the region as a result of the military gamble in 2008.

[17:34:49]

Kotrikadze:

Then let us go back to the events of 2008. Back then, you met with the Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili. Your meeting took place in St. Petersburg. And there was an impression at that point, both in Tbilisi and in Moscow, that we had arrived at some sort of an accord, and the dispute would not be allowed to boil over into an armed conflict. And I

reiterate that this feeling was present both in Moscow and in Tbilisi. Could you tell us whether you managed to agree on anything with the Georgian president back then?

[17:35:16]

Medvedev:

You know, Catherine, I had the same impression at the time. I can still recall meeting President Saakashvili for the first time. It was in Petersburg. We met in the Constantine Palace, and as Mr. Saakashvili arrived, I told him, literally: "You know, there are many problems in the region at the moment. Georgia is at odds with these unrecognized states. But I can assure you as a newly elected President of Russia that I shall do everything in my capacity to help you find some compromise solutions that would accommodate everyone, and would eventually facilitate reintegration of Georgian territory. If that is acceptable for all the parties engaged in negotiation, naturally." That is what I told him, word for word. His response was, "But of course, we are ready to co-operate." And I also had this impression that we could at least try to find some creative solutions, if not open a new chapter entirely. But first of all, there was an opportunity to meet on a regular basis.

What happened later on? We held meetings, we had conversations. As far as I remember, our last meeting took place in Astana. There, we agreed that we would sit down and have a serious discussion. And the venue for that would be right here, in Sochi. I told Saakashvili: "Come to Sochi, and we will have a sensible discussion on all of our issues." By that time, Saakashvili had started going on about Georgia's problems and its perception of the situation, and I explained Russia's opinion for him. But since we were in Astana at the time, marking its anniversary, I invited Saakashvili to come to Russia. And he said, "Alright, I am ready to do this." I can tell you earnestly, I spent the next month checking regularly for any feedback from our Georgian counterpart. There was nothing. But at the same time, Georgia was getting more and more visits from 'envoys from across the ocean', as they would be dubbed in Soviet-speak. The moment of truth for me, as I realized later while analyzing those events in hindsight over and over again, came with the visit by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Following that visit, my Georgian colleague simply dropped all communication with us. He simply stopped talking to us, he stopped writing letters and making phone calls. It was apparent that he had some new plans now. And those plans were implemented later.

[17:37:55]

Venediktov:

Mr. President, am I correct to assume that, the way you see it, that visit by the US Secretary of State was meant to urge President Saakashvili into war? Do you think the United States was deliberately encouraging Georgia to pursue a conflict?

[17:38:08]

Medvedev:

No, I don't think so. The United States is a very large country headed by pragmatic people. But in politics, connotations and nuances are very important. There was a time once, back when I was Head of the Presidential Administration, when I paid a visit to the White House and met with none other than Condi Rice and the then head of the President's Executive Office. And at some point, we were joined by George W. Bush. He simply walked in in a common casual manner, like "Hey, hello." And the first thing he told me was, "You know, Misha Saakashvili is a great guy." I said to him: "Mr. President, I don't know. I've never met him. Maybe I will one day."

Unfortunately, his words have proved to be darkly prophetic. Mind you, those were the very first words I heard from George Bush during our personal meeting.

As it is, I don't believe the Americans had urged Georgia's president to invade. But I do believe that there were certain subtleties and certain hints made - statements like "It's time to restore constitutional order," or "It's time to be more assertive," - which could effectively feed Saakashvili's apparent hopes that the Americans would back him in any conflict, that they would stand up for Georgia and even go to war with the Russians. Therefore, I do see a relation between Ms. Rice's visit to Georgia and the events that followed. Just as I see a link to my further discussions with the US president: our phone conversations and then our personal meetings.

[17:39:47]

Kotrikadze:

So there was no 'green light' from the White House? This is a phrase they often repeat when analyzing the war of 2008: "It must have been greenlighted by Washington."

[17:39:57]

Medvedev:

Well, I would have to at least have some official information or intelligence reports to be able to make such a statement. I don't have them. But we can make analysis: My Georgian counterpart ceased all communication with us following a visit

by Condoleezza Rice. Maybe that was just a coincidence. But I'm almost absolutely sure that that was when they came up with a plan for the military gamble, which ensued in August 2008.

[17:40:22]

Venediktov:

President Saakashvili claims that Russia had been preparing for war long before August 2008. He cites your predecessor, then-president Vladimir Putin as saying, "We will show you some Northern Cyprus," - that's a quote, according to Saakashvili. You were part of the government at the time. Can you confirm or deny that such deliberations took place?

[17:40:45]

Medvedev:

That is just total bunk. Mr. Saakashvili generally does a lot of talking, and he often loses control of what he is saying. There were no discussions of the kind - I would know, as I've been part of the government for over ten years. That's number one. And secondly, conflicts are no good for anyone, ever. Those who say you can resolve something through violence are liars. Conflicts have never resulted in anything good. If we had managed to prevent this war, it would have been to everyone's benefit, and Georgia's in the first place. The fact that it didn't happen is a real tragedy. And in my opinion, only one person is responsible for this - it's just the way governments function - and that man is the President of Georgia.

[17:41:38]

Sophie:

But in any case, Mr. President, war represents a failure of diplomacy. (*Medvedev: Exactly.*) Looking back at the situation three years later, what would you have done in a different way? What is it that Russia failed to do in order to avoid the war?

[17:41:53]

Medvedev:

I can tell you frankly: Had I realized back in July 2008 that Mr. Saakashvili was nurturing such plans in his inflamed mind, maybe I would have addressed him in an even tougher way. And I would've tried to drag him out of his environment at home, get him to come to Russia, or some third country, in order to talk to him, simply talk him out of this. But of course, I had no idea. So when it all happened, even though we had been aware that there were plans in Georgia to 'restore their territorial integrity' through the use of force, I still thought it was a paranoid scenario that would never become reality. You always keep hoping that common sense will prevail over this kind of rationale. That is why I was surprised by what happened on August 8th, and I've explained it many times: I realized that by unleashing this war, Saakashvili had personally devoted his country to destruction. And that is the scariest part, both for him and for the Georgian people.

[17:43:06]

Sophie:

When interviewed by Alexey Venediktov, Mr. Saakashvili told him that you were actually avoiding him during the summit in Astana. And that made it clear for him that a conflict was now unavoidable.

[17:43:17]

Medvedev:

Well, what can I say? First of all, he is a difficult man to evade, because he sticks to **you like a barnacle**. If he wants to get hold of you, he will do a fair job of it. He approached me several times and we spoke. I remember it clearly: we talked while sitting on a bus and we talked while taking a walk in a park. I'll tell you more. In the evening, we went out for a cup of tea and a glass of wine. And even there, we sat on a sofa and kept discussing the prospect of a meeting. So Saakashvili is making this up. Let it lie on his conscience, along with many other things.

[17:43:48]

Kotrikadze:

Speaking of Saakashvili personally, and of Russia-Georgia relations after 2008, there has been no progress whatsoever; they are non-existent. And it is clear that to a certain extent, it's been due to the personal attitudes of either leader. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili put forth an official proposal recently, advocating a dialogue with no preconditions. Why did you turn it down, considering that Saakashvili is a legitimately elected president of Georgia?

[17:44:18]

Medvedev:

I did it only because Saakashvili had committed a crime against the Russian Federation and its nationals. Hundreds of our citizens were killed on his orders, including Russian peacekeepers. I will never forgive him for that, and I will not talk to him, even though he occasionally tries winking at me at various international fora. I can talk to anyone else, no problem.

We can discuss any issues - of course, as long as we observe the present international legal status of the region, and stay within the context of the decisions I've had to take. And believe me, those were very hard decisions. But Mr. Saakashvili is a person I'll never shake hands with. I realize that he is the legally elected president of Georgia, and it is only up to the Georgian people **to grant or deny him a vote of confidence**. Anyway, I am confident about one thing: sooner or later, Mikhail Saakashvili will no longer be president of Georgia. Such are the rules of politics. And whoever becomes the next president in Georgia, they will have a chance to restore positive and beneficial relations with Russia. Moreover, I can tell you personally that it is absolutely painful for me to see that our countries lack positive relations, because we are very close as nations and as people. If not for this dimwit gamble of 2008, we could have kept up our dialogue for years, despite all of its political complexities, and we could have eventually arrived at a solution that would be acceptable for everybody, including the Georgians and the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That is exactly what I'll never forgive Saakashvili for. And I think that the Georgian people ought to express their assessment of Saakashvili, but do it through a democratic process.

Wrapping up our discussion on Saakashvili, I can tell you this: He should actually be thankful to me for halting our troops at some point. If they had marched into Tbilisi, Georgia would most likely have a different president by now.

[17:46:23]

Sophie:

Mr. President, we actually have a whole bunch of questions on that subject. (*Medvedev: A bunch? Oh no, I've already said a lot.*) Why did you decide not to march on Tbilisi?

[17:46:31]

Medvedev:

I believe that the peace enforcement operation, which took five days, was a mission accomplished. Our mission was not to capture Tbilisi or any other city in Georgia. Our only objective was to halt the invasion that Saakashvili had unleashed. Besides, I'm neither a judge nor an executioner. I'd like to stress once again that it is up to the people of Georgia to assess Saakashvili and decide his fate through a democratic vote. Well, maybe they could also use other means, the way it sometimes happens in history. But deposing Saakashvili by force wasn't on my agenda back then, and I can tell you earnestly I still think it was the right decision. Even though it would've been a piece of cake.

[17:47:26]

Sophie:

One more question. In Europe, they still believe that while Russia's initial response was legitimate as self-defence, further actions of the Russian troops were excessive. After all, why wasn't it an option to simply push the Georgian forces out of South Ossetia and stop at that point?

[17:47:45]

Medvedev:

You know, Sophie, people are free to make speculations like that, and I have come across them many times. But try putting yourself in the shoes of Russia's Commander-in-Chief - my shoes, that is. Sure, we could have merely forced them out and stopped there. But what were we hearing from Georgia? "We shall fall back to our initial position, and our American friends and their allies will help us re-arm ourselves, get us new aircraft and what not, and then we shall resume the same offensive with renewed vigour." Letting them do that would have been a crime against the memory of those who died protecting **their land**. Therefore, our mission at the time was to destroy Georgia's war machine, so that it wouldn't be able to target civilians in Ossetia, Abkhazia and the Russian Federation - because, as you know, it's all mixed there.

[17:48:43]

Venediktov:

Mr. President, you were referring to the peace enforcement operation, and I keep thinking back to today: Libya and Syria. When do you consider it acceptable to step in? What is your rationale for deciding whether it's okay to launch a peace-enforcement mission? Here is Russia being lenient to Gaddafi in Libya, and here it is imposing sanctions against Syria. How do you accommodate your decisions on Georgia back then, and Russia's stance on today's crises?

[17:49:07]

Medvedev:

You see, Alexey, it is always case by case. There are no identical countries, and there are no identical situations. I guess it's clear to you what is going on in Libya: there's a man who has been running the country for forty years, and at some point he decided to use force against his own people. This was condemned by the entire international community, including Russia. We are not taking part in the military campaign, whereas a few nations are attempting to instill order in Libya through military means. We don't think it is the right thing to do, but there is one nuance you should keep in mind. Georgia had been split into three parts by the time of the war - it should've been about pulling the country back together

for them rather than merely 'restoring constitutional order' - whereas Libya is still in one piece. Such a risk does exist for Libya, but so far all the parties to the conflict, including the so-called rebels and the pro-Gaddafi forces, have pledged to preserve their country's territorial integrity. So the situations are quite different. However, I'm not saying this to explain how we make decisions. I am merely trying to demonstrate that all of these situations and scenarios are totally diverse. This goes for other countries as well.

[17:50:24]

Venediktov:

What about Syria?

[17:50:26]

Medvedev:

Syria is a more complex issue, but, sadly, their situation has been unfolding in a very dramatic way so far. All of us practical politicians should keep a close watch of the developments in that country. Gaddafi, for one, had issued unequivocal orders to slaughter opposition activists. By contrast, Syria's president never ordered anything like that. Unfortunately, people are dying in Syria in grave numbers, and that arouses our deepest concerns. Therefore, in my discussions with President Assad during our personal conversations and in our correspondence I have been advocating one principal idea: that he should immediately launch reforms, reconcile with the opposition, restore civil accord, and start developing a modern state. Should he fail to do that, he is in for a grim fate, and we will eventually have to take some decisions on Syria, too. Naturally, we have been watching developments very attentively. The situation is changing, and so are our objectives.

[17:51:31]

Venediktov:

Allow me to speak bluntly then: How is Saakashvili's action on Tskhinvali different from what Russia was doing to Grozny back in 1999?

[17:51:38]

Medvedev:

This is a question I get to hear rather often. The difference is that Russia was not after the same objectives in Grozny as Georgia was in Tskhinvali. We were pursuing a legitimate task of restoring order. We were not set on mass-killing our own people. We were fighting criminals: the people who defied a legitimate government, draping themselves with various slogans, from pseudo-Islamic notions to pure extremist propaganda. There was nothing of the kind in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia, since these two republics had long existed as self-proclaimed independent states which had their own governments and maintained some sort of law and order. These cases are essentially different.

[17:52:36]

Kotrikadze:

Let us look at some of the numbers. In the wake of the war in 2008, Russian envoys and the representatives of South Ossetia's de facto government argued that the fighting in Tskhinvali had claimed 2,000 lives. That was the number that was announced. Later on, Russia's Investigative Committee estimated the casualties at no more than 150 people. Meanwhile, it was this alleged toll of 2,000 that had served as one of the main reasons for launching the so-called peace enforcement operation. How would you account for this discrepancy now, three years after the war?

[17:53:13]

Medvedev:

I have explained my rationale for taking that decision on numerous occasions. You see, I didn't look to any figures for motivation. This isn't exactly a case for mathematics. Let me remind you what was going on there. On the night between August 7th and August 8th, I received a phone call from the defence minister. I was on vacation at the time, sailing down the Volga River. And the whole world was looking forward to the Olympics that were about to take off in China. The minister told me that Georgia had launched a full-scale combat operation. To be honest, my initial reaction was complete doubt. I told the minister: "We should check this. Is Saakashvili completely out of his mind? Maybe it's just a provocative act, maybe he is stress-testing the Ossetians and trying to send us some kind of a message?" An hour later, the minister reported to me: "This is no bluff. They've unleashed an all-out artillery barrage, and they're using Grad rocket launchers and what not." I said, "Alright. I'll wait for another update." Some more time passed, and the minister called again: "I have something to tell you. They've just levelled a tent full of our peacekeepers, killing every one of them." What was I supposed to do? I said: "Return fire and shoot to kill."

No figures had been announced at that point. Unfortunately, such situations are always about instant situation reports and instant decisions, and difficult ones too. I can tell you that was the hardest night of my life. Casualty estimates started coming in later. They did diverge indeed, and they still do. I am not a detective, nor a forensic expert. I don't perform

exhumations. Our Ossetian friends and colleagues tell us that many bodies were buried back then and remain missing to this date. Meanwhile, Georgian analysts present different estimates. But you know, we can't use this kind of logic: Two thousand lives is serious enough, and 150 does not even qualify as casualties...

[17:55:13]

Kotrikadze

But a lot of Tskhinval's citizens were evacuated then, because they knew...

Sophie

Two weeks before the conflict started.

[17:55:22]

Medvedev

Some of them may have been away, certainly. But my answer to your question is - the number of casualties should never influence your decision on what retaliation measures you are going to take. If you are a sane person, that is.

[17:55:38]

Venediktov

Mr. President, you said you gave the order to return fire. But the operation continued after that. Heavy weapons rolled in and the conflict turned into an all-out war. Could you tell us about how you made the decision to continue the operation? And another question that all our colleagues would like answered: who called whom first? Did you call Prime Minister Putin in Beijing first or did he call you? How did you and the prime minister co-ordinate the move?

[17:56:01]

Medvedev

To be honest with you, no-one called anyone. The first time I contacted him about the conflict was about 24 hours after it had broken out

Venediktov

Twenty four hours?!

Medvedev

Yes. I had already issued all the orders to the military. Tskhinval was already ablaze. Mr. Putin just made a statement, condemning Tbilisi's move. That was the right thing to do, of course. We spoke, twenty four hours after the attack over a secure line. As you understand, it's not very appropriate to discuss matters like this by cellphone. It's also a lot of trouble to establish a secure line connection with someone who is in a different country. We talked, and then we talked more when he came back. But even before his return I called a meeting of the Security Council. I explained my position, my decision to return fire and engage in conflict. Security Council members voiced their support for my decision. Some time later, we had the meeting in Sochi, which Mr. Putin attended. That was how it went.

[17:56:50]

Venediktov

In relation to this, we have to mention Mr. Sarkozy who was at the time chairman of the EU

Medvedev

I can't talk about him without a smile, unlike the other president we discussed today.

Venediktov

Why is that?

Medvedev

Because I like him.

Venediktov

I see. According so some, it was Sarkozy who persuaded you to halt the Russian forces' march towards Tbilisi.

Medvedev

Of course not. No head of state is capable of talking another head of state into anything. Look at the world trying to talk Gaddafi into giving up. Have they persuaded him to do anything? No, and I don't think they will. He would sooner die in his bunker. Let me stress this again: taking cities was never our goal. Our goal was to stop the war machine which was at the time aimed at two breakaway territories and, regrettably, at our citizens. What Sarkozy did was very kind. He called me and said: "I heard there was conflict, do you want me to fly over to Moscow?" I said I would be happy to see him. Then he told me: "I am currently chairing the EU. I could come over to discuss the incident." He is very good at this sort of thing

and he loves doing it. He came to Moscow and we talked. I explained my position to him. He told me: "I understand and I agree. Some things I will be able to say in public, some I won't, but regardless of that, I want to have a part in stopping this conflict." I told him: "All right, let's put a plan together." That plan was later called the Medvedev-Sarkozy ceasefire. I told him he could take the plan to Georgia. The best thing about what he did was probably that he had the courage to come to Russia at a time when literally everyone was talking about what we had done. He was brave enough to go on to Georgia with our initiatives and he garnered a satisfactory reaction from the Georgian authorities, President Saakashvili first and foremost. That was his contribution to the diplomatic cause that helped solve the conflict. To this day, I am very thankful to President Sarkozy for having done that. His role was very important but he never said anything like "maybe you should stop here." He understood that my decisions were my own. His goal, of course, being to stop the conflict as soon as possible.

[17:59:14]

Sophie

Mr. President, according to some analysts, the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was not entirely in line with the spirit of the Medvedev-Sarkozy ceasefire. The plan was that Russian troops would return to where they were before the conflict. Russia for its part recognised the two breakaway republics and stationed its forces at military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. How did Mr. Sarkozy react to that?

Medvedev

Well I would not want him to bear responsibility for a decree that I signed. He was not involved in the work on the decree to recognise the two republics.

Sophie

Not the decision to recognise them, I was referring to the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan.

Medvedev

I can say that I never discussed the matter with him. He did not come to Moscow to discuss it. He was never involved in the matter. Of course, I can tell you that he and several other EU representatives disapproved of the decision. They told us we were creating problems for ourselves. I heard them, but pleasing our partners was not my priority when I made this decision. As for the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan, it was not about the breakaway republics. The plan was aimed at stopping the war that Saakashvili's undertaking had caused. In that sense it was a complete success. Russia's position on that is quite simple: The Medvedev-Sarkozy plan was carried out and it was successful. I consider all other interpretations of the events to be wrong.

Venediktov

But French officials - Prime Minister Fillon and recently President Sarkozy - have said they were still waiting for President Medvedev to complete Medvedev-Sarkozy plan.

Kotrikadze

Meaning - for Russian forces to return to their positions.

[18:01:02]

Medvedev

I can tell you one thing. France has its own position and so does the EU. These positions are different from ours. We can't do anything about it. They are just different. I believe I have fully completed the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan. The plan said nothing about Russia not recognising Abkhazia or South Ossetia or anything of the sort. As for the retreat, our forces have retreated.

Kotrikadze

To their pre-conflict positions.

Medvedev

Yes, to what Russia believes to be their pre-war positions.

[18:01:31]

Kotrikadze

Regarding the EU and the international perception of the conflict, the US and the EU have been criticising Russia for failing to complete the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan. In addition, The US Senate recently stated that, like the European Parliament, they believe that Russia's actions in Georgia have led to the occupation of 20% of Georgia's territory. As a liberal leader, how do you feel about them phrasing it that way?

Medvedev

I think that, as the liberal leader of a modern and developing Russia, I can only give one possible answer. These statements are unfounded. They reflect the preferences of certain senior citizens in the Senate who, due to non-objective reasons, have aligned themselves with certain individuals. That's completely up to them. We are talking about a foreign parliament and I do not much care about how they phrase their statements. My position is different. It is embodied in the decrees I signed over that difficult period. I will be frank with you, although you may disagree. I am not ashamed of having signed those decrees. Not only am I not ashamed, I believe these decisions were much needed, and they were right. There was no other way to stop the tragedy. Those decisions were very difficult to make. I realised what sort of repercussions they might bring. I can tell you that I have had long discussions with my aides about these decrees and we saw no obvious solution to the crisis at first. Nevertheless, I think the decisions I made were well thought-out. The essence of it was to recognise the territories as subjects to international law so we could protect them. As for what that might bring - a question that inevitably follows - no one knows. You know, I would be very happy if the Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities went to the negotiating table to discuss how they would continue living side by side. How peace and security would be enforced in the region; what the future holds for their closely-related peoples; what they could create together. I would be happy if it came to that. Russia would never obstruct such negotiations.

[18:04:31]

Venediktov

Mr. President. We have talked about the reactions of the US Senate and the European Parliament. Let me now ask you about how our partners in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and CIS reacted. Not a single member of the CSTO, CIS or the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation supported Russia's actions. These are countries that call themselves Russia's allies and partners. They didn't support Russia's actions and they did not recognise the breakaway republics. How do you feel today when you discuss the matter with officials from these states?

Medvedev

Let me tell you how it went. When the conflict broke out, I called for a CSTO meeting. I spoke to my partners and I told them that I had to make a difficult decision. I told them I did not expect anything from them. I understood how hard it would be for them to make a decision of that sort. I said: "A lot of you have territorial issues. All of you have economic problems. The world we live in is complicated and interdependent. The decision we have made is final but that does not mean I am asking you to recognise these new republics. If you do recognise them, it will be by your own decision. If you do not, our position will not change. Now, I may be a young and liberal president but I do have some experience and I realised that I would not find many supporters after having made that admission. But that is another matter.

[18:06:10]

Venediktov

You could regard it as an example to Nagorno-Karabakh [[in the southern Caucasus]]...

Medvedev

You are not letting me finish.

Venediktov

No, I just want to bring the discussion of this to a close with an example that is relevant today. You are personally involved in negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh. You have had nine rounds of consultations...

Kotrikadze

And no result.

Venediktov

Nothing. I think the last round did not get us anywhere either. How do you think Armenia and Azerbaijan feel when they look at what happened to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What are they supposed to do? Should they take the region back by force?

Medvedev

That's a great question, Alexei. You know, both President Aliyev and President Sargsyan came to Sochi shortly after the conflict in Georgia broke out. Do you know what they told me? They said it was a very bad thing, bad for the Caucasus. But then each of them added that it was also a lesson. They said they realised it was better to conduct seemingly endless negotiations on what will happen to Nagorno-Karabakh, whether the region will ever have a referendum and what the peace treaty would look like than go through five days of war. I think this is a good example because if our friend in Georgia had been a little smarter we could have been meeting in Sochi, Kazan, or any other venue today to discuss possible middle-of-the-road solutions for the relations between Georgia and its breakaway provinces. It would have been

a political process. I do not know what it would lead to. We may never have reached an agreement. A confederation, perhaps? What Saakashvili did was rip his own country into pieces. This is what people are going to remember.

[18:08:30]

Sophie

Coming back to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. You said that you might have been able to reach an agreement if it had not been for Saakashvili.

Medvedev

I didn't say we would come to an agreement. I said that, if it was not for Saakashvili, we would be able to restore our diplomatic relations and begin negotiations on any issue apart from those that we already have a position on. But we will be ready to discuss even those issues.

Sophie

But the problem is, there is no political party in Georgia that would stand for the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Therefore, no matter who is elected after Saakashvili, they will disagree with Russia's position.

Medvedev

We will have our differences, of course, but they will be people we would be able to negotiate with. I am sure they will be willing to negotiate, in spite of our possible disagreements.

Kotrikadze

What if Georgians continue to vote for the people currently in charge, for the way the country is going now. What would happen then?

Medvedev

I may say some unflattering words about Saakashvili because, unlike President Sarkozy, he does not seem like a person worthy of respect.

Kotrikadze

Although the people of Georgia evidently disagree with that.

Medvedev

But I could not insult the Georgian people. If the people of Georgia vote for a certain clique of people, that is a choice made by the people of Georgia. We will respect that. It would probably not have a very good effect on our relations, but we will respect the choice of the Georgian people.

[18:10:05]

Sophie

The Russian Orthodox Church considers South Ossetia and Abkhazia parts of the Georgian patriarchate's jurisdiction. Why is it that the positions of the spiritual and secular authorities on this matter are so different?

Medvedev

Because secular authority is one thing and spiritual authority is another. In this case, the secular authorities were forced to make certain decisions in very dire circumstances. If these circumstances had not arisen, the decisions would not have been made. Talking about the spiritual authority, they work in a different sphere that I do not want to discuss in detail. It would not be reasonable if I did. I have discussed the matter with both Patriarch Kirill and Patriarch Catholicos Ilia the Second. The situation itself is not outstanding. Canonical territories are often different from state borders. For instance, Russia and Ukraine are two different countries today, but the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate works in Ukraine.

[18:11:10]

Venediktov

Mr. President, a question about South Ossetia. 95% of its residents are Russian citizens. In the 2008 presidential election, 90% of South Ossetians voted for President Medvedev. They receive benefits, pensions and everything else a Russian citizen is entitled to. They are Russian citizens. By looking at that, we can tell that Ossetians are still a divided people. They are divided into North Ossetia and South Ossetia. Stalin's legacy.

Medvedev

Sadly, yes.

Venediktov:

Has the possibility of uniting these two republics been discussed by the Russian authorities? Perhaps South Ossetia could become part of Russia. How would you feel about that?

Medvedev

There is no legal precondition for this as of now, but we can't tell what the future will bring. The situation could develop in any way whatsoever. Looking at it now, I think there are no legal or de facto prerequisites for that to happen. This is the reason my decrees called for recognition of the breakaway states as subjects of international law, nothing more. I think that it is a good way to develop neighbourly relations between Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is a normal way of doing that.

Venediktov

So the fact that all South Ossetians are Russian citizens and they are voting for President Medvedev is not a legal prerequisite for South Ossetia becoming a part of Russia?

Medvedev

It serves to create a certain environment in South Ossetia, but I don't know what is going to happen in 15 or 20 years. What the South Ossetian demographic will look like. How many Russian citizens South Ossetia will have, as opposed to citizens of South Ossetia. Are we going to introduce double citizenships or take some other measures? That is why I do not want to leap ahead. I would emphasise that there are currently no legal preconditions for that to happen. But life goes on and things change.

[18:13:20]

Sophie

Mr. President, you predicted that the world would not recognise the breakaway states quickly. The process is going very slowly indeed. As of today, only three countries in the world have recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Obviously, this makes the life of the republics' residents very inconvenient. For instance, a trip abroad could prove problematic for a resident. Are you ready to help them and start issuing Russian foreign passports to citizens of Abkhazia South Ossetia?

Medvedev

If they ask for it, then of course we will give them what they want. Given that they are willing to become citizens of Russia.

Sophie

You said the decision to continue the operation in Georgia was a difficult one, that some of your aides tried to talk you out of it. Since the war ended, Russia has allocated 40 billion rubles' worth of humanitarian aid to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is a huge amount of money that could have been used to resolve certain problems in Russia. What is Russia trying to achieve by giving that aid?

Medvedev

We have a lot of programmes to help and support other countries. Abkhazia and South Ossetia right now may be closest to Russia in diplomatic terms. They are entirely dependent on us. They are close to us and there are Russian citizens living there. Now if we are providing aid to foreign citizens in foreign states, then of course we are going to provide to nearby independent territories with a large share of Russian citizens. This is normal. We used to help God knows who, you know. I mean, in Soviet times.

[18:15:00]

Venediktov

Mr. President, you have said that Saakashvili should face an international tribunal. I would like you to elaborate on that. Should heads of state face international trials? The recent trial of [[Egypt's]] Hosni Mubarak in an international tribunal. How do you feel about it? Does it set a legal precedent?

Medvedev

I look at it as a lawyer would. Let us forget about Saakashvili for a moment. If it is an international tribunal initiated by one or several states, supported by the international community, then there is no problem there. But if the tribunal in question is an example of voluntarism, if its purpose is to resolve a political problem by removing a leader, then I am against it. That is the difference. If an international tribunal is called to judge a leader following an international incident, then such a tribunal has the legal competence, the higher justice, if you will, to judge a head of state. But if the tribunal is only motivated by someone's whim to change the political system of a state, I would strongly disapprove.

[18:16:32]

Venediktov

Having said that, does Russia believe an international tribunal should be founded to look into the events of August 2008?

Medvedev

If you asked for my personal opinion, I would say yes. I think what happened there was a flagrant violation of international laws. However, it would not be possible to rely on Russia's position alone in this matter, so the creation of such a tribunal is impossible. This means the conflict will be ultimately judged by history or, in a shorter-term perspective, the voters of Georgia who will have to decide which way their country should go.

[18:17:12]

Kotrikadze

But, Mr. President, I just want you to understand that Georgia's biggest problem right now is 500,000 refugees.

Medvedev

I realise that.

Kotrikadze

Moving on. The question of Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation is very relevant these days. Russia wants in to the WTO, the WTO wants Russia. The problem, as far as we understand, is that Georgia is blocking Russia's accession. It is the only country that's not in favour of Russia joining the WTO. There has been talk about Georgia agreeing to agree to Russia's accession if Russia lifts its embargo on the import of Georgian goods or makes some other concessions. Is Russia willing to barter for it, and what is your take on the prospect of Russia joining the WTO?

Medvedev

That was very well put. The one thing I don't want to do is barter for it. That would be immoral. Georgia has a position on Russia's WTO accession. We respect that position as we respect the stance of any other sovereign state, as long as that position is in line with the goals set out in the WTO's charter. Trade, trade preferences, customs regimes... we are ready to discuss it all. The imports of wine and mineral water? We will discuss anything. But the problem is something else. In essence, our colleagues in Georgia are trying to force on us a new edition of the political problem under the guise of WTO accession. I am referring to entry points, control over the traffic of goods, then they will want to get the EU involved... Our position on this is clear: if you want information about the traffic of goods, including transit through Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we will provide it via a modern electronic database. I have agreed to the suggestions made by the Swiss president regarding this and I recently discussed it with President Obama. We are ready to implement the model that Switzerland has proposed to us. However, if they try to change current political realities, serving it as a prerequisite for Russia's WTO accession, we will not fall for it. WTO accession is not too high a price to pay here.

[18:19:35]

Venediktov

Taking that into account, what do you think are the chances of Russia joining the WTO before the end of 2011?

Medvedev

I think the chances are quite high. We have been working a lot on this. I have been motivating my colleagues in Russia and creating stimuli for it abroad, negotiating with foreign leaders. If the Georgian authorities show wisdom in this case... I think it could become a point of contact between our countries, if not quite a turning point in our relations. We could use it to re-establish trade and economic relations and after that, we may go on to our diplomatic relations. Let me remind you that we were not the ones to sever our diplomatic relations in the first place. That was initiated by Georgia. That would be good, but the ball is in their court.

Venediktov

But the chances are high?

Medvedev

I believe they are. There are some political obstacles. If these things come into play at some point, that may result in us having to go back to the initial stage of our negotiations. That would be bad for everyone, including the WTO.

[18:20:53]

Sophie

Mr. President, if you will excuse a somewhat menial question. It's about visas. I have a lot of Russian friends who go to Georgia for their vacations. They get their visas in the airport on arrival. On the other hand, I cannot invite any of my Georgian friends to Russia. Even inviting relatives to Russia is a problem. Do you have any plans to relax the visa regime with Georgia in the near future?

Medvedev

I am willing to do it but the problem, as I have said, is that we have no one to negotiate with. Generally, we are open to sensible initiatives. If not from Saakashvili, we are ready to consider suggestions coming from other Georgian officials. We only recently restored air traffic and it seems to be working. We have to move towards that goal.

Sophie

I wanted to ask if you had friends in Georgia. Have you ever visited Georgia?

Medvedev

I do have some friends from Georgia, of course. I don't know what they are doing now but I think the majority of them live in Russia. We studied at the legal department together. They were very nice, friendly people, we were good friends. I have only been to Abkhazia before the conflict happened. That was in 1995. I left with a somewhat grim impression. I went to Sochi and then myself and a friend went on to Georgia. We drove around Abkhazia, looked at the sight. We came back and, a year later, the crisis broke out. I felt very sorry. I thought, 'what a beautiful land, with its beautiful and hospitable people. Now I can't even go there because of what is happening.' That was how I felt about the events of the early 1990s.

[18:23:15]

Kotrikadze

Mr. President, I have a question about Russian-Georgian relations, but not the recent conflict. Some media have reported that the CIA has confirmed Georgia's version about the bombing of the US embassy in Tbilisi being organised by Russia's special services, as well as a number of other bombings in Georgia. Some media have reported that some world leaders have confronted you about this. Can you confirm this?

Medvedev

Let me put this plainly. No head of state has said anything about this to me. Georgia might be upset about this, but this subject is not on my agenda of negotiations with EU leaders. It is just not there. The subject was painful in 2008 because of the conflict, but now it's off the agenda. There is one issue on it, the WTO accession, which we are discussing, mainly with the US, sometimes with EU representatives. As for the explosions, the version you mentioned is pure provocative nonsense.

[18:24:25]

Venediktov

A question about Abkhazia, Mr. President. Every answer you give prompts two more questions. Saakashvili started the war with South Ossetia. But why did we recognise Abkhazia? Georgian troops did not enter it, no one died, a war did not break out there, but we recognised Abkhazia as well. Why is that?

Kotrikadze

The second frontline was actually in Abkhazia.

Medvedev

I think the answer to this question is perfectly obvious. We could not recognise one territory and ignore the other. It would have been the same as saying: 'you attacked South Ossetia, we recognised them. Now attack Abkhazia and we will recognise them as well'.

Kotrikadze

So you think they were planning to attack Abkhazia as well?

Medvedev

I am certain of that. What's more, South Ossetia was the 'weakest link'. It is small, sparsely populated and, perhaps, less stable. 'Let us test our strength there, and then if it works, we will try to restore constitutional order in Abkhazia,' they thought. Well, it didn't work, and that was their fatal mistake.

[18:25:39]

Venediktov

You know, Mr. President, children are usually very direct when they ask you questions.

Medvedev

Do you have a child's outlook on life?

Venediktov

I do and I am proud of it.

Medvedev

You are a lucky man.

Venediktov

Yes. In that sense, yes. I will ask you a simple question: are you proud of what you did in 2008, are you ashamed, do you suffer because of it? Now that three years have passed, how would you describe your emotions?

Medvedev

I will try to answer this, I don't know if I can do it like a child would but I will try. I suffer, to this day, because of what happened then. I am convinced, however, that the decision to retaliate and the recognition of the breakaway republics as subjects to international law were the right decisions to make. I believe my actions were constitutional. Not only am I unashamed of what I have done, I believe my decisions were lawful, thought-out and necessary.

[18:26:40]

Venediktov

Moving on, and perhaps to wrap this up, a recent poll conducted in Russia indicates that 39% of Russians believe a second war with Georgia is possible. I don't know what the figure is for Georgia...

Kotrikadze

People have not been polled about this, but you can feel that the possibility is discussed.

Sophie

Ever since the first war ended.

Kotrikadze

It is being discussed all the time.

Venediktov

Not just by politicians either. Taxi drivers are talking about it.

Medvedev

Perfectly understandable in a small country.

Sophie

What can you say to the Georgian people regarding this?

Medvedev

This would be a very appropriate thing to do at the end of this interview. First, I hope that our countries never engage in armed conflicts again, even during Mr. Saakashvili's term in office. I think he has learned his lesson. Secondly, it is important for us to move on from this sad chapter of our relations. We should remember what happened, but be focused on the future. We should restore the strong bonds that existed between the Russian and Georgian people. These bonds still exist, you are living proof of that. You live in the two countries; you visit both Georgia and Russia. But I would like to see these connections restored completely. I would like to see it happen as soon as possible. It would not only be beneficial for the two countries. It is, if you will, a call of the heart. I mean this sincerely. I would like to see it happen soon. We can make it happen if we work, but Russia cannot do it on its own.

Sophie`

Thank you very much

Medvedev

Thank you.

[17:33:04]

Kotrikadze:

Mr. President, thank you very much for agreeing to answer our questions, including those from the Georgian PIK TV network. August 2008, the Russia-Georgia war - that was three years ago, but its consequences are still felt today, even though that war only lasted for five days. Right now, we are in Sochi, and Georgia is just a few kilometres away: Abkhazia is right across the border from here. But I cannot go to Abkhazia, I being Georgian, because I will be simply denied entry. And it will be Russian border guards who will stop me. Five hundred thousand **Georgian** refugees have found themselves in a similar situation, being unable to return to their homes. How could you help those people?

[17:33:50]

Medvedev:

I think it is possible to help them, but that would require action aimed at finally restoring peace, so that Abkhazians, Georgians and Ossetians could engage in civilized dialogue. That would enable them to deal even with the most complex challenges, including the issue of refugees, or the issue of entry and transit. All of these matters are secondary to the conflict that took place almost exactly three years ago. Therefore, diplomatic efforts, negotiation, and the willingness to listen to one another - these are the necessary prerequisites for resolving these issues. And on top of that, one also needs to recognize the reality that has emerged in the region as a result of the military gamble in 2008.

[17:34:49]

Kotrikadze:

Then let us go back to the events of 2008. Back then, you met with the Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili. Your meeting took place in St. Petersburg. And there was an impression at that point, both in Tbilisi and in Moscow, that we had arrived at some sort of an accord, and the dispute would not be allowed to boil over into an armed conflict. And I reiterate that this feeling was present both in Moscow and in Tbilisi. Could you tell us whether you managed to agree on anything with the Georgian president back then?

[17:35:16]

Medvedev:

You know, Catherine, I had the same impression at the time. I can still recall meeting President Saakashvili for the first time. It was in Petersburg. We met in the Constantine Palace, and as Mr. Saakashvili arrived, I told him, literally: "You know, there are many problems in the region at the moment. Georgia is at odds with these unrecognized states. But I can assure you as a newly elected President of Russia that I shall do everything in my capacity to help you find some compromise solutions that would accommodate everyone, and would eventually facilitate reintegration of Georgian territory. If that is acceptable for all the parties engaged in negotiation, naturally." That is what I told him, word for word. His response was, "But of course, we are ready to co-operate." And I also had this impression that we could at least try to find some creative solutions, if not open a new chapter entirely. But first of all, there was an opportunity to meet on a regular basis.

What happened later on? We held meetings, we had conversations. As far as I remember, our last meeting took place in Astana. There, we agreed that we would sit down and have a serious discussion. And the venue for that would be right here, in Sochi. I told Saakashvili: "Come to Sochi, and we will have a sensible discussion on all of our issues." By that time, Saakashvili had started going on about Georgia's problems and its perception of the situation, and I explained Russia's opinion for him. But since we were in Astana at the time, marking its anniversary, I invited

Saakashvili to come to Russia. And he said, "Alright, I am ready to do this." I can tell you earnestly, I spent the next month checking regularly for any feedback from our Georgian counterpart. There was nothing. But at the same time, Georgia was getting more and more visits from 'envoys from across the ocean', as they would be dubbed in Soviet-speak. The moment of truth for me, as I realized later while analyzing those events in hindsight over and over again, came with the visit by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Following that visit, my Georgian colleague simply dropped all communication with us. He simply stopped talking to us, he stopped writing letters and making phone calls. It was apparent that he had some new plans now. And those plans were implemented later.

[17:37:55]

Venediktov:

Mr. President, am I correct to assume that, the way you see it, that visit by the US Secretary of State was meant to urge President Saakashvili into war? Do you think the United States was deliberately encouraging Georgia to pursue a conflict?

[17:38:08]

Medvedev:

No, I don't think so. The United States is a very large country headed by pragmatic people. But in politics, connotations and nuances are very important. There was a time once, back when I was Head of the Presidential Administration, when I paid a visit to the White House and met with none other than Condi Rice and the then head of the President's Executive Office. And at some point, we were joined by George W. Bush. He simply walked in in a common casual manner, like "Hey, hello." And the first thing he told me was, "You know, Misha Saakashvili is a great guy." I said to him: "Mr. President, I don't know. I've never met him. Maybe I will one day."

Unfortunately, his words have proved to be darkly prophetic. Mind you, those were the very first words I heard from George Bush during our personal meeting.

As it is, I don't believe the Americans had urged Georgia's president to invade. But I do believe that there were certain subtleties and certain hints made - statements like "It's time to restore constitutional order," or "It's time to be more assertive," - which could effectively feed Saakashvili's apparent hopes that the Americans would back him in any conflict, that they would stand up for Georgia and even go to war with the Russians. Therefore, I do see a relation between Ms. Rice's visit to Georgia and the events that followed. Just as I see a link to my further discussions with the US president: our phone conversations and then our personal meetings.

[17:39:47]

Kotrikadze:

So there was no 'green light' from the White House? This is a phrase they often repeat when analyzing the war of 2008: "It must have been greenlighted by Washington."

[17:39:57]

Medvedev:

Well, I would have to at least have some official information or intelligence reports to be able to make such a statement. I don't have them. But we can make analysis: My Georgian counterpart ceased all communication with us following a visit by Condoleezza Rice. Maybe that was just a coincidence. But I'm almost absolutely sure that that was when they came up with a plan for the military gamble, which ensued in August 2008.

[17:40:22]

Venediktov:

President Saakashvili claims that Russia had been preparing for war long before August 2008. He cites your predecessor, then-president Vladimir Putin as saying, "We will show you some Northern Cyprus," - that's a quote, according to Saakashvili. You were part of the government at the time. Can you confirm or deny that such deliberations took place?

[17:40:45]

Medvedev:

That is just total bunk. Mr. Saakashvili generally does a lot of talking, and he often loses control of what he is saying. There were no discussions of the kind - I would know, as I've been part of the government for over ten years. That's number one. And secondly, conflicts are no good for anyone, ever. Those who say you can resolve something through violence are liars. Conflicts have never resulted in anything good. If we had managed to prevent this war, it would have been to everyone's benefit, and Georgia's in the first place. The fact that it didn't happen is a real tragedy. And in my opinion, only one person is responsible for this - it's just the way governments function - and that man is the President of Georgia.

[17:41:38]

Sophie:

But in any case, Mr. President, war represents a failure of diplomacy. (*Medvedev: Exactly.*) Looking back at the situation three years later, what would you have done in a different way? What is it that Russia failed to do in order to avoid the war?

[17:41:53]

Medvedev:

I can tell you frankly: Had I realized back in July 2008 that Mr. Saakashvili was nurturing such plans in his inflamed mind, maybe I would have addressed him in an even tougher way. And I would've tried to drag him out of his environment at home, get him to come to Russia, or some third country, in order to talk to him, simply talk him out of this. But of course, I had no idea. So when it all happened, even though we had been aware that there were plans in Georgia to 'restore their territorial integrity' through the use of force, I still thought it was a paranoid scenario that would never become reality. You always keep hoping that common sense will prevail over this kind of rationale. That is why I was surprised by what happened on August 8th, and I've explained it many times: I realized that by unleashing this war, Saakashvili had personally devoted his country to destruction. And that is the scariest part, both for him and for the Georgian people.

[17:43:06]

Sophie:

When interviewed by Alexey Venediktov, Mr. Saakashvili told him that you were actually avoiding him during the summit in Astana. And that made it clear for him that a conflict was now unavoidable.

[17:43:17]

Medvedev:

Well, what can I say? First of all, he is a difficult man to evade, because he sticks to **you like a barnacle**. If he wants to get hold of you, he will do a fair job of it. He approached me several times and we spoke. I remember it clearly: we talked while sitting on a bus and we talked while taking a walk in a park. I'll tell you more. In the evening, we went out for a cup of tea and a glass of wine. And even there, we sat on a sofa and kept discussing the prospect of a meeting. So Saakashvili is making this up. Let it lie on his conscience, along with many other things.

[17:43:48]

Kotrikadze:

Speaking of Saakashvili personally, and of Russia-Georgia relations after 2008, there has been no progress whatsoever; they are non-existent. And it is clear that to a certain extent, it's been due to the personal attitudes of either leader. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili put forth an official proposal recently, advocating a dialogue with no preconditions. Why did you turn it down, considering that Saakashvili is a legitimately elected president of Georgia?

[17:44:18]

Medvedev:

I did it only because Saakashvili had committed a crime against the Russian Federation and its nationals. Hundreds of our citizens were killed on his orders, including Russian peacekeepers. I will never forgive him for that, and I will not talk to him, even though he occasionally tries winking at me at various international fora. I can talk to anyone else, no problem. We can discuss any issues - of course, as long as we observe the present international legal status of the region, and stay within the context of the decisions I've had to take. And believe me, those were very hard decisions. But Mr. Saakashvili is a person I'll never shake hands with. I realize that he is the legally elected president of Georgia, and it is only up to the Georgian people **to grant or deny him a vote of confidence**. Anyway, I am confident about one thing: sooner or later, Mikhail Saakashvili will no longer be president of Georgia. Such are the rules of politics. And whoever becomes the next president in Georgia, they will have a chance to restore positive and beneficial relations with Russia. Moreover, I can tell you personally that it is absolutely painful for me to see that our countries lack positive relations, because we are very close as nations and as people. If not for this dimwit gamble of 2008, we could have kept up our dialogue for years, despite all of its political complexities, and we could have eventually arrived at a solution that would be acceptable for everybody, including the Georgians and the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That is exactly what I'll never forgive Saakashvili for. And I think that the Georgian people ought to express their assessment of Saakashvili, but do it through a democratic process.

Wrapping up our discussion on Saakashvili, I can tell you this: He should actually be thankful to me for halting our troops at some point. If they had marched into Tbilisi, Georgia would most likely have a different president by now.

[17:46:23]

Sophie:

Mr. President, we actually have a whole bunch of questions on that subject. (*Medvedev: A bunch? Oh no, I've already said a lot.*) Why did you decide not to march on Tbilisi?

[17:46:31]

Medvedev:

I believe that the peace enforcement operation, which took five days, was a mission accomplished. Our mission was not to capture Tbilisi or any other city in Georgia. Our only objective was to halt the invasion that Saakashvili had unleashed. Besides, I'm neither a judge nor an executioner. I'd like to stress once again that it is up to the people of Georgia to assess Saakashvili and decide his fate through a democratic vote. Well, maybe they could also use other means, the way it sometimes happens in history. But deposing Saakashvili by force wasn't on my agenda back then, and I can tell you earnestly I still think it was the right decision. Even though it would've been a piece of cake.

[17:47:26]

Sophie:

One more question. In Europe, they still believe that while Russia's initial response was legitimate as self-defence, further actions of the Russian troops were excessive. After all, why wasn't it an option to simply push the Georgian forces out of South Ossetia and stop at that point?

[17:47:45]

Medvedev:

You know, Sophie, people are free to make speculations like that, and I have come across them many times. But try putting yourself in the shoes of Russia's Commander-in-Chief - my shoes, that is. Sure, we could have merely forced them out and stopped there. But what were we hearing from Georgia? "We shall fall back to our initial position, and our American friends and their allies will help us re-arm ourselves, get us new aircraft and what not, and then we shall resume the same offensive with renewed vigour." Letting them do that would have been a crime against the memory of those who died protecting **their land**. Therefore, our mission at the time was to destroy Georgia's war machine, so that it wouldn't be able to target civilians in Ossetia, Abkhazia and the Russian Federation - because, as you know, it's all mixed there.

[17:48:43]

Venediktov:

Mr. President, you were referring to the peace enforcement operation, and I keep thinking back to today: Libya and Syria. When do you consider it acceptable to step in? What is your rationale for deciding whether it's okay to launch a peace-enforcement mission? Here is Russia being lenient to Gaddafi in Libya, and here it is imposing sanctions against Syria. How do you accommodate your decisions on Georgia back then, and Russia's stance on today's crises?

[17:49:07]

Medvedev:

You see, Alexey, it is always case by case. There are no identical countries, and there are no identical situations. I guess it's clear to you what is going on in Libya: there's a man who has been running the country for forty years, and at some point he decided to use force against his own people. This was condemned by the entire international community, including Russia. We are not taking part in the military campaign, whereas a few nations are attempting to instill order in Libya through military means. We don't think it is the right thing to do, but there is one nuance you should keep in mind. Georgia had been split into three parts by the time of the war - it should've been about pulling the country back together for them rather than merely 'restoring constitutional order' - whereas Libya is still in one piece. Such a risk does exist for Libya, but so far all the parties to the conflict, including the so-called rebels and the pro-Gaddafi forces, have pledged to preserve their country's territorial integrity. So the situations are quite different. However, I'm not saying this to explain how we make decisions. I am merely trying to demonstrate that all of these situations and scenarios are totally diverse. This goes for other countries as well.

[17:50:24]

Venediktov:

What about Syria?

[17:50:26]

Medvedev:

Syria is a more complex issue, but, sadly, their situation has been unfolding in a very dramatic way so far. All of us practical politicians should keep a close watch of the developments in that country. Gaddafi, for one, had issued unequivocal orders to slaughter opposition activists. By contrast, Syria's president never ordered anything like that. Unfortunately, people are dying in Syria in grave numbers, and that arouses our deepest concerns. Therefore, in my discussions with President

Assad during our personal conversations and in our correspondence I have been advocating one principal idea: that he should immediately launch reforms, reconcile with the opposition, restore civil accord, and start developing a modern state. Should he fail to do that, he is in for a grim fate, and we will eventually have to take some decisions on Syria, too. Naturally, we have been watching developments very attentively. The situation is changing, and so are our objectives.

[17:51:31]

Venediktov:

Allow me to speak bluntly then: How is Saakashvili's action on Tskhinvali different from what Russia was doing to Grozny back in 1999?

[17:51:38]

Medvedev:

This is a question I get to hear rather often. The difference is that Russia was not after the same objectives in Grozny as Georgia was in Tskhinvali. We were pursuing a legitimate task of restoring order. We were not set on mass-killing our own people. We were fighting criminals: the people who defied a legitimate government, draping themselves with various slogans, from pseudo-Islamic notions to pure extremist propaganda. There was nothing of the kind in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia, since these two republics had long existed as self-proclaimed independent states which had their own governments and maintained some sort of law and order. These cases are essentially different.

[17:52:36]

Kotrikadze:

Let us look at some of the numbers. In the wake of the war in 2008, Russian envoys and the representatives of South Ossetia's de facto government argued that the fighting in Tskhinvali had claimed 2,000 lives. That was the number that was announced. Later on, Russia's Investigative Committee estimated the casualties at no more than 150 people. Meanwhile, it was this alleged toll of 2,000 that had served as one of the main reasons for launching the so-called peace enforcement operation. How would you account for this discrepancy now, three years after the war?

[17:53:13]

Medvedev:

I have explained my rationale for taking that decision on numerous occasions. You see, I didn't look to any figures for motivation. This isn't exactly a case for mathematics. Let me remind you what was going on there. On the night between August 7th and August 8th, I received a phone call from the defence minister. I was on vacation at the time, sailing down the Volga River. And the whole world was looking forward to the Olympics that were about to take off in China. The minister told me that Georgia had launched a full-scale combat operation. To be honest, my initial reaction was complete doubt. I told the minister: "We should check this. Is Saakashvili completely out of his mind? Maybe it's just a provocative act, maybe he is stress-testing the Ossetians and trying to send us some kind of a message?" An hour later, the minister reported to me: "This is no bluff. They've unleashed an all-out artillery barrage, and they're using Grad rocket launchers and what not." I said, "Alright. I'll wait for another update." Some more time passed, and the minister called again: "I have something to tell you. They've just levelled a tent full of our peacekeepers, killing every one of them." What was I supposed to do? I said: "Return fire and shoot to kill."

No figures had been announced at that point. Unfortunately, such situations are always about instant situation reports and instant decisions, and difficult ones too. I can tell you that was the hardest night of my life. Casualty estimates started coming in later. They did diverge indeed, and they still do. I am not a detective, nor a forensic expert. I don't perform exhumations. Our Ossetian

friends and colleagues tell us that many bodies were buried back then and remain missing to this date. Meanwhile, Georgian analysts present different estimates. But you know, we can't use this kind of logic: Two thousand lives is serious enough, and 150 does not even qualify as casualties...

[17:55:13]

Kotrikadze

But a lot of Tskhinval's citizens were evacuated then, because they knew...

Sophie

Two weeks before the conflict started.

[17:55:22]

Medvedev

Some of them may have been away, certainly. But my answer to your question is - the number of casualties should never influence your decision on what retaliation measures you are going to take. If you are a sane person, that is.

[17:55:38]

Venediktov

Mr. President, you said you gave the order to return fire. But the operation continued after that. Heavy weapons rolled in and the conflict turned into an all-out war. Could you tell us about how you made the decision to continue the operation? And another question that all our colleagues would like answered: who called whom first? Did you call Prime Minister Putin in Beijing first or did he call you? How did you and the prime minister co-ordinate the move?

[17:56:01]

Medvedev

To be honest with you, no-one called anyone. The first time I contacted him about the conflict was about 24 hours after it had broken out

Venediktov

Twenty four hours?!

Medvedev

Yes. I had already issued all the orders to the military. Tskhinval was already ablaze. Mr. Putin just made a statement, condemning Tbilisi's move. That was the right thing to do, of course. We spoke, twenty four hours after the attack over a secure line. As you understand, it's not very appropriate to discuss matters like this by cellphone. It's also a lot of trouble to establish a secure line connection with someone who is in a different country. We talked, and then we talked more when he came back. But even before his return I called a meeting of the Security Council. I explained my position, my decision to return fire and engage in conflict. Security Council members voiced their support for my decision. Some time later, we had the meeting in Sochi, which Mr. Putin attended. That was how it went.

[17:56:50]

Venediktov

In relation to this, we have to mention Mr. Sarkozy who was at the time chairman of the EU

Medvedev

I can't talk about him without a smile, unlike the other president we discussed today.

Venediktov

Why is that?

Medvedev

Because I like him.

Venediktov

I see. According so some, it was Sarkozy who persuaded you to halt the Russian forces' march towards Tbilisi.

Medvedev

Of course not. No head of state is capable of talking another head of state into anything. Look at the world trying to talk Gaddafi into giving up. Have they persuaded him to do anything? No, and I don't think they will. He would sooner die in his bunker. Let me stress this again: taking cities was never our goal. Our goal was to stop the war machine which was at the time aimed at two breakaway territories and, regrettably, at our citizens. What Sarkozy did was very kind. He called me and said: "I heard there was conflict, do you want me to fly over to Moscow?" I said I would be happy to see him. Then he told me: "I am currently chairing the EU. I could come over to discuss the incident." He is very good at this sort of thing and he loves doing it. He came to Moscow and we talked. I explained my position to him. He told me: "I understand and I agree. Some things I will be able to say in public, some I won't, but regardless of that, I want to have a part in stopping this conflict." I told him: "All right, let's put a plan together." That plan was later called the Medvedev-Sarkozy ceasefire. I told him he could take the plan to Georgia. The best thing about what he did was probably that he had the courage to come to Russia at a time when literally everyone was talking about what we had done. He was brave enough to go on to Georgia with our initiatives and he garnered a satisfactory reaction from the Georgian authorities, President Saakashvili first and foremost. That was his contribution to the diplomatic cause that helped solve the conflict. To this day, I am very thankful to President Sarkozy for having done that. His role was very important but he never said anything like "maybe you should stop here." He understood that my decisions were my own. His goal, of course, being to stop the conflict as soon as possible.

[17:59:14]

Sophie

Mr. President, according to some analysts, the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was not entirely in line with the spirit of the Medvedev-Sarkozy ceasefire. The plan was that Russian troops would return to where they were before the conflict. Russia for its part recognised the two breakaway republics and stationed its forces at military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. How did Mr. Sarkozy react to that?

Medvedev

Well I would not want him to bear responsibility for a decree that I signed. He was not involved in the work on the decree to recognise the two republics.

Sophie

Not the decision to recognise them, I was referring to the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan.

Medvedev

I can say that I never discussed the matter with him. He did not come to Moscow to discuss it. He was never involved in the matter. Of course, I can tell you that he and several other EU representatives disapproved of the decision. They told us we were creating problems for ourselves. I heard them, but pleasing our partners was not my priority when I made this decision. As for the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan, it was not about the breakaway republics. The plan was aimed at stopping the war that Saakashvili's undertaking had caused. In that sense it was a complete success.

Russia's position on that is quite simple: The Medvedev-Sarkozy plan was carried out and it was successful. I consider all other interpretations of the events to be wrong.

Venediktov

But French officials - Prime Minister Fillon and recently President Sarkozy - have said they were still waiting for President Medvedev to complete Medvedev-Sarkozy plan.

Kotrikadze

Meaning - for Russian forces to return to their positions.

[18:01:02]

Medvedev

I can tell you one thing. France has its own position and so does the EU. These positions are different from ours. We can't do anything about it. They are just different. I believe I have fully completed the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan. The plan said nothing about Russia not recognising Abkhazia or South Ossetia or anything of the sort. As for the retreat, our forces have retreated.

Kotrikadze

To their pre-conflict positions.

Medvedev

Yes, to what Russia believes to be their pre-war positions.

[18:01:31]

Kotrikadze

Regarding the EU and the international perception of the conflict, the US and the EU have been criticising Russia for failing to complete the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan. In addition, The US Senate recently stated that, like the European Parliament, they believe that Russia's actions in Georgia have led to the occupation of 20% of Georgia's territory. As a liberal leader, how do you feel about them phrasing it that way?

Medvedev

I think that, as the liberal leader of a modern and developing Russia, I can only give one possible answer. These statements are unfounded. They reflect the preferences of certain senior citizens in the Senate who, due to non-objective reasons, have aligned themselves with certain individuals. That's completely up to them. We are talking about a foreign parliament and I do not much care about how they phrase their statements. My position is different. It is embodied in the decrees I signed over that difficult period. I will be frank with you, although you may disagree. I am not ashamed of having signed those decrees. Not only am I not ashamed, I believe these decisions were much needed, and they were right. There was no other way to stop the tragedy. Those decisions were very difficult to make. I realised what sort of repercussions they might bring. I can tell you that I have had long discussions with my aides about these decrees and we saw no obvious solution to the crisis at first. Nevertheless, I think the decisions I made were well thought-out. The essence of it was to recognise the territories as subjects to international law so we could protect them. As for what that might bring - a question that inevitably follows - no one knows. You know, I would be very happy if the Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities went to the negotiating table to discuss how they would continue living side by side. How peace and security would be enforced in the region; what the future holds for their closely-related peoples; what they could create together. I would be happy if it came to that. Russia would never obstruct such negotiations.

[18:04:31]

Venediktov

Mr. President. We have talked about the reactions of the US Senate and the European Parliament. Let me now ask you about how our partners in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and CIS reacted. Not a single member of the CSTO, CIS or the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation supported Russia's actions. These are countries that call themselves Russia's allies and partners. They didn't support Russia's actions and they did not recognise the breakaway republics. How do you feel today when you discuss the matter with officials from these states?

Medvedev

Let me tell you how it went. When the conflict broke out, I called for a CSTO meeting. I spoke to my partners and I told them that I had to make a difficult decision. I told them I did not expect anything from them. I understood how hard it would be for them to make a decision of that sort. I said: "A lot of you have territorial issues. All of you have economic problems. The world we live in is complicated and interdependent. The decision we have made is final but that does not mean I am asking you to recognise these new republics. If you do recognise them, it will be by your own decision. If you do not, our position will not change. Now, I may be a young and liberal president but I do have some experience and I realised that I would not find many supporters after having made that admission. But that is another matter."

[18:06:10]

Venediktov

You could regard it as an example to Nagorno-Karabakh [[in the southern Caucasus]]...

Medvedev

You are not letting me finish.

Venediktov

No, I just want to bring the discussion of this to a close with an example that is relevant today. You are personally involved in negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh. You have had nine rounds of consultations...

Kotrikadze

And no result.

Venediktov

Nothing. I think the last round did not get us anywhere either. How do you think Armenia and Azerbaijan feel when they look at what happened to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What are they supposed to do? Should they take the region back by force?

Medvedev

That's a great question, Alexei. You know, both President Aliyev and President Sargsyan came to Sochi shortly after the conflict in Georgia broke out. Do you know what they told me? They said it was a very bad thing, bad for the Caucasus. But then each of them added that it was also a lesson. They said they realised it was better to conduct seemingly endless negotiations on what will happen to Nagorno-Karabakh, whether the region will ever have a referendum and what the peace treaty would look like than go through five days of war. I think this is a good example because if our friend in Georgia had been a little smarter we could have been meeting in Sochi, Kazan, or any other venue today to discuss possible middle-of-the-road solutions for the relations between Georgia and its breakaway provinces. It would have been a political process. I do not know what it

would lead to. We may never have reached an agreement. A confederation, perhaps? What Saakashvili did was rip his own country into pieces. This is what people are going to remember.

[18:08:30]

Sophie

Coming back to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. You said that you might have been able to reach an agreement if it had not been for Saakashvili.

Medvedev

I didn't say we would come to an agreement. I said that, if it was not for Saakashvili, we would be able to restore our diplomatic relations and begin negotiations on any issue apart from those that we already have a position on. But we will be ready to discuss even those issues.

Sophie

But the problems is, there is no political party in Georgia that would stand for the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Therefore, no matter who is elected after Saakashvili, they will disagree with Russia's position.

Medvedev

We will have our differences, of course, but they will be people we would be able to negotiate with. I am sure they will be willing to negotiate, in spite of our possible disagreements.

Kotrikadze

What if Georgians continue to vote for the people currently in charge, for the way the country is going now. What would happen then?

Medvedev

I may say some unflattering words about Saakashvili because, unlike President Sarkozy, he does not seem like a person worthy of respect.

Kotrikadze

Although the people of Georgia evidently disagree with that.

Medvedev

But I could not insult the Georgian people. If the people of Georgia vote for a certain clique of people, that is a choice made by the people of Georgia. We will respect that. It would probably not have a very good effect on our relations, but we will respect the choice of the Georgian people.

[18:10:05]

Sophie

The Russian Orthodox Church considers South Ossetia and Abkhazia parts of the Georgian patriarchate's jurisdiction. Why is it that the positions of the spiritual and secular authorities on this matter are so different?

Medvedev

Because secular authority is one thing and spiritual authority is another. In this case, the secular authorities were forced to make certain decisions in very dire circumstances. If these circumstances had not arisen, the decisions would not have been made. Talking about the spiritual authority, they work in a different sphere that I do not want to discuss in detail. It would not be reasonable if I did. I have discussed the matter with both Patriarch Kirill and Patriarch Catholicos Ilia the Second. The situation itself is not outstanding. Canonical territories are often different from state borders.

For instance, Russia and Ukraine are two different countries today, but the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate works in Ukraine.

[18:11:10]

Venediktov

Mr. President, a question about South Ossetia. 95% of its residents are Russian citizens. In the 2008 presidential election, 90% of South Ossetians voted for President Medvedev. They receive benefits, pensions and everything else a Russian citizen is entitled to. They are Russian citizens. By looking at that, we can tell that Ossetians are still a divided people. They are divided into North Ossetia and South Ossetia. Stalin's legacy.

Medvedev

Sadly, yes.

Venediktov:

Has the possibility of uniting these two republics been discussed by the Russian authorities? Perhaps South Ossetia could become part of Russia. How would you feel about that?

Medvedev

There is no legal precondition for this as of now, but we can't tell what the future will bring. The situation could develop in any way whatsoever. Looking at it now, I think there are no legal or de facto prerequisites for that to happen. This is the reason my decrees called for recognition of the breakaway states as subjects of international law, nothing more. I think that it is a good way to develop neighbourly relations between Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is a normal way of doing that.

Venediktov

So the fact that all South Ossetians are Russian citizens and they are voting for President Medvedev is not a legal prerequisite for South Ossetia becoming a part of Russia?

Medvedev

It serves to create a certain environment in South Ossetia, but I don't know what is going to happen in 15 or 20 years. What the South Ossetian demographic will look like. How many Russian citizens South Ossetia will have, as opposed to citizens of South Ossetia. Are we going to introduce double citizenships or take some other measures? That is why I do not want to leap ahead. I would emphasise that there are currently no legal preconditions for that to happen. But life goes on and things change.

[18:13:20]

Sophie

Mr. President, you predicted that the world would not recognise the breakaway states quickly. The process is going very slowly indeed. As of today, only three countries in the world have recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Obviously, this makes the life of the republics' residents very inconvenient. For instance, a trip abroad could prove problematic for a resident. Are you ready to help them and start issuing Russian foreign passports to citizens of Abkhazia South Ossetia?

Medvedev

If they ask for it, then of course we will give them what they want. Given that they are willing to become citizens of Russia.

Sophie

You said the decision to continue the operation in Georgia was a difficult one, that some of your aides tried to talk you out of it. Since the war ended, Russia has allocated 40 billion rubles' worth of humanitarian aid to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is a huge amount of money that could have been used to resolve certain problems in Russia. What is Russia trying to achieve by giving that aid?

Medvedev

We have a lot of programmes to help and support other countries. Abkhazia and South Ossetia right now may be closest to Russia in diplomatic terms. They are entirely dependent on us. They are close to us and there are Russian citizens living there. Now if we are providing aid to foreign citizens in foreign states, then of course we are going to provide to nearby independent territories with a large share of Russian citizens. This is normal. We used to help God knows who, you know. I mean, in Soviet times.

[18:15:00]

Venediktov

Mr. President, you have said that Saakashvili should face an international tribunal. I would like you to elaborate on that. Should heads of state face international trials? The recent trial of [[Egypt's]] Hosni Mubarak in an international tribunal. How do you feel about it? Does it set a legal precedent?

Medvedev

I look at it as a lawyer would. Let us forget about Saakashvili for a moment. If it is an international tribunal initiated by one or several states, supported by the international community, then there is no problem there. But if the tribunal in question is an example of voluntarism, if its purpose is to resolve a political problem by removing a leader, then I am against it. That is the difference. If an international tribunal is called to judge a leader following an international incident, then such a tribunal has the legal competence, the higher justice, if you will, to judge a head of state. But if the tribunal is only motivated by someone's whim to change the political system of a state, I would strongly disapprove.

[18:16:32]

Venediktov

Having said that, does Russia believe an international tribunal should be founded to look into the events of August 2008?

Medvedev

If you asked for my personal opinion, I would say yes. I think what happened there was a flagrant violation of international laws. However, it would not be possible to rely on Russia's position alone in this matter, so the creation of such a tribunal is impossible. This means the conflict will be ultimately judged by history or, in a shorter-term perspective, the voters of Georgia who will have to decide which way their country should go.

[18:17:12]

Kotrikadze

But, Mr. President, I just want you to understand that Georgia's biggest problem right now is 500,000 refugees.

Medvedev

I realise that.

Kotrikadze

Moving on. The question of Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation is very relevant these days. Russia wants in to the WTO, the WTO wants Russia. The problem, as far as we understand, is that Georgia is blocking Russia's accession. It is the only country that's not in favour of Russia joining the WTO. There has been talk about Georgia agreeing to agree to Russia's accession if Russia lifts its embargo on the import of Georgian goods or makes some other concessions. Is Russia willing to barter for it, and what is your take on the prospect of Russia joining the WTO?

Medvedev

That was very well put. The one thing I don't want to do is barter for it. That would be immoral. Georgia has a position on Russia's WTO accession. We respect that position as we respect the stance of any other sovereign state, as long as that position is in line with the goals set out in the WTO's charter. Trade, trade preferences, customs regimes... we are ready to discuss it all. The imports of wine and mineral water? We will discuss anything. But the problem is something else. In essence, our colleagues in Georgia are trying to force on us a new edition of the political problem under the guise of WTO accession. I am referring to entry points, control over the traffic of goods, then they will want to get the EU involved... Our position on this is clear: if you want information about the traffic of goods, including transit through Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we will provide it via a modern electronic database. I have agreed to the suggestions made by the Swiss president regarding this and I recently discussed it with President Obama. We are ready to implement the model that Switzerland has proposed to us. However, if they try to change current political realities, serving it as a prerequisite for Russia's WTO accession, we will not fall for it. WTO accession is not too high a price to pay here.

[18:19:35]

Venediktov

Taking that into account, what do you think are the chances of Russia joining the WTO before the end of 2011?

Medvedev

I think the chances are quite high. We have been working a lot on this. I have been motivating my colleagues in Russia and creating stimuli for it abroad, negotiating with foreign leaders. If the Georgian authorities show wisdom in this case... I think it could become a point of contact between our countries, if not quite a turning point in our relations. We could use it to re-establish trade and economic relations and after that, we may go on to our diplomatic relations. Let me remind you that we were not the ones to sever our diplomatic relations in the first place. That was initiated by Georgia. That would be good, but the ball is in their court.

Venediktov

But the chances are high?

Medvedev

I believe they are. There are some political obstacles. If these things come into play at some point, that may result in us having to go back to the initial stage of our negotiations. That would be bad for everyone, including the WTO.

[18:20:53]

Sophie

Mr. President, if you will excuse a somewhat menial question. It's about visas. I have a lot of Russian friends who go to Georgia for their vacations. They get their visas in the airport on arrival.

On the other hand, I cannot invite any of my Georgian friends to Russia. Even inviting relatives to Russia is a problem. Do you have any plans to relax the visa regime with Georgia in the near future?

Medvedev

I am willing to do it but the problem, as I have said, is that we have no one to negotiate with. Generally, we are open to sensible initiatives. If not from Saakashvili, we are ready to consider suggestions coming from other Georgian officials. We only recently restored air traffic and it seems to be working. We have to move towards that goal.

Sophie

I wanted to ask if you had friends in Georgia. Have you ever visited Georgia?

Medvedev

I do have some friends from Georgia, of course. I don't know what they are doing now but I think the majority of them live in Russia. We studied at the legal department together. They were very nice, friendly people, we were good friends. I have only been to Abkhazia before the conflict happened. That was in 1995. I left with a somewhat grim impression. I went to Sochi and then myself and a friend went on to Georgia. We drove around Abkhazia, looked at the sight. We came back and, a year later, the crisis broke out. I felt very sorry. I thought, 'what a beautiful land, with its beautiful and hospitable people. Now I can't even go there because of what is happening.' That was how I felt about the events of the early 1990s.

[18:23:15]

Kotrikadze

Mr. President, I have a question about Russian-Georgian relations, but not the recent conflict. Some media have reported that the CIA has confirmed Georgia's version about the bombing of the US embassy in Tbilisi being organised by Russia's special services, as well as a number of other bombings in Georgia. Some media have reported that some world leaders have confronted you about this. Can you confirm this?

Medvedev

Let me put this plainly. No head of state has said anything about this to me. Georgia might be upset about this, but this subject is not on my agenda of negotiations with EU leaders. It is just not there. The subject was painful in 2008 because of the conflict, but now it's off the agenda. There is one issue on it, the WTO accession, which we are discussing, mainly with the US, sometimes with EU representatives. As for the explosions, the version you mentioned is pure provocative nonsense.

[18:24:25]

Venediktov

A question about Abkhazia, Mr. President. Every answer you give prompts two more questions. Saakashvili started the war with South Ossetia. But why did we recognise Abkhazia? Georgian troops did not enter it, no one died, a war did not break out there, but we recognised Abkhazia as well. Why is that?

Kotrikadze

The second frontline was actually in Abkhazia.

Medvedev

I think the answer to this question is perfectly obvious. We could not recognise one territory and ignore the other. It would have been the same as saying: 'you attacked South Ossetia, we recognised them. Now attack Abkhazia and we will recognise them as well'.

Kotrikadze

So you think they were planning to attack Abkhazia as well?

Medvedev

I am certain of that. What's more, South Ossetia was the 'weakest link'. It is small, sparsely populated and, perhaps, less stable. 'Let us test our strength there, and then if it works, we will try to restore constitutional order in Abkhazia,' they thought. Well, it didn't work, and that was their fatal mistake.

[18:25:39]

Venediktov

You know, Mr. President, children are usually very direct when they ask you questions.

Medvedev

Do you have a child's outlook on life?

Venediktov

I do and I am proud of it.

Medvedev

You are a lucky man.

Venediktov

Yes. In that sense, yes. I will ask you a simple question: are you proud of what you did in 2008, are you ashamed, do you suffer because of it? Now that three years have passed, how would you describe your emotions?

Medvedev

I will try to answer this, I don't know if I can do it like a child would but I will try. I suffer, to this day, because of what happened then. I am convinced, however, that the decision to retaliate and the recognition of the breakaway republics as subjects to international law were the right decisions to make. I believe my actions were constitutional. Not only am I unashamed of what I have done, I believe my decisions were lawful, thought-out and necessary.

[18:26:40]

Venediktov

Moving on, and perhaps to wrap this up, a recent poll conducted in Russia indicates that 39% of Russians believe a second war with Georgia is possible. I don't know what the figure is for Georgia...

Kotrikadze

People have not been polled about this, but you can feel that the possibility is discussed.

Sophie

Ever since the first war ended.

Kotrikadze

It is being discussed all the time.

Venediktov

Not just by politicians either. Taxi drivers are talking about it.

Medvedev

Perfectly understandable in a small country.

Sophie

What can you say to the Georgian people regarding this?

Medvedev

This would be a very appropriate thing to do at the end of this interview. First, I hope that our countries never engage in armed conflicts again, even during Mr. Saakashvili's term in office. I think he has learned his lesson. Secondly, it is important for us to move on from this sad chapter of our relations. We should remember what happened, but be focused on the future. We should restore the strong bonds that existed between the Russian and Georgian people. These bonds still exist, you are living proof of that. You live in the two countries; you visit both Georgia and Russia. But I would like to see these connections restored completely. I would like to see it happen as soon as possible. It would not only be beneficial for the two countries. It is, if you will, a call of the heart. I mean this sincerely. I would like to see it happen soon. We can make it happen if we work, but Russia cannot do it on its own.

Sophie`

Thank you very much

Medvedev

Thank you.

Eugene Kaspersky, CEO and co-founder of Kaspersky Lab

"Over the past two or three years we have seen a culmination in IT security problems: cyber threats are now targeting not only computers but mobile devices, not only individual users but big corporations and state structures. Industrial systems and other infrastructure elements that are critically important both for the national and global economy and security are also at risk.

"I am speaking specifically about a global threat because cyber attacks are international: they emerge from a territory which has no borders. In order to successfully combat this phenomenon, broad cooperation at the international level is necessary. Regardless of how powerful a country may be and the amount of resources it is ready to spend, it is impossible to solve this problem on a national level. That is why I always have and always will welcome collaboration between special cybercrime police units from different countries. That's why, if it is required, we always provide technical and expert assistance in investigating computer crimes.

"We cooperate both with the Russian cyber police and their colleagues in Latin America, the USA, Europe and Asia. Cooperation between Russian and foreign law enforcement agencies, especially American, is becoming closer and more effective: you regularly hear in the news about the arrest of Russian cybercriminals who were active not only in Russia but in North America. I believe the further strengthening of this cooperation is inevitable – it is necessary not only to combat global cybercrime more effectively but also to improve mutual understanding between Russia and the USA."

Eugene Kaspersky, CEO and co-founder of Kaspersky Lab

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Austria, Kristine

From: Levy, Robin
Sent: Thursday, August 11, 2011 2:40 PM
To: Gerald.Smith@huffingtonpost.com
Subject: Russia continues cracking down on cybercrime
Attachments: Eugene Kaspersky quotes on cybersecurity.doc

Dear Gerry,

What do Rupert Murdoch and Pavel Vrublevsky, co-founder of Russia's largest online payment processor, have in common? Not much, you would guess. BUT – though Vrublevsky is by no means a media mogul, he is co-founder of ChronoPay and like Mr. Murdoch is preparing for his moment in the camera lights' glare - as a result of similarly questionable business tactics.

The Russian government is tough on hacking and cybercrime – and Vrublevsky – accused of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack blocking access to its competitor's website is just one example of the government's zero-tolerance approach to the issue.

How is Russia leading the way when it comes to this rapidly emerging problem? Available for interviews is Eugene Kaspersky, CEO and co-founder of Russian computer security company, Kaspersky Lab, who says, "**Cooperation between Russian and foreign law enforcement agencies, especially American, is becoming closer and more effective:** you regularly hear in the news about the arrest of Russian cybercriminals who were active not only in Russia but in North America. I believe the further strengthening of this cooperation is inevitable – it is necessary not only to combat global cybercrime more effectively but also to improve mutual understanding between Russia and the USA."

Eugene can discuss latest cybersecurity trends as well as Russia's on-going work to stem these crimes - many of which originate within its own borders. As a result of the issue, Russia has developed multiple enforcement mechanisms to improve cybersecurity, which include:

- In June, **the U.S. Cybersecurity Coordinator Howard Schmidt and Russian National Security Council Deputy Secretary Nikolay Klimashin agreed to collaborate on cybersecurity-enhancing efforts** by regularly exchanging information between both nations' Computer Emergency Response/Readiness Teams (CERTs) on technical threats, exchanging military views on cyberspace operations and establishing protocols for communicating about cybersecurity issues. These three mechanisms will be established by the end of the year.
- In May, **Russia joined fellow G8 members in signing The G8 Summit Declaration, which reflects Russian initiatives on countering cybercrime** and the use of the Internet for child trafficking and sexual exploitation. As a result, Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov is currently leading a working group preparing proposals for improving Internet laws.
- In April, President **Dmitry Medvedev strengthened the country's e-signature law for confirming the authenticity of digital messages** to bring the rule in line with similar regulations around the world. The revised law uses more current technology to confirm the identity of a person signing an electronic document through the use of codes, passwords and a signature key. The law also created certifying centers to authorize and regulate the use of e-signatures.

Please let me know if you'd like to schedule some time to talk to Eugene Kaspersky from Kaspersky Labs or would like more information on Russia's cybersecurity efforts. Also, congratulations on your new position!

Thank you,
Robin

*Materials disseminated by Ketchum Inc. on behalf of the Russian Federation. Additional information regarding the dissemination of these materials can be obtained at the Department of Justice.

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